

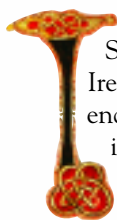


PART II: THE



THE HISTORY

# The Coming of Christianity

nto the darkness of the Gentiles came the light of Christianity. Seeing the dawning of a new light from the East, the old gods of Ireland fled away, diminishing and fading into the myths and legends of the sacred isle. The next great invasion was at hand. This invasion, however, was not one of conquering kings, giants and mighty men, but of men meager of stature and worldly import, whose message of love and self-sacrifice would turn the ancient world upside down.

The invasion of Christianity into Ireland came at first not as a flood, but as a trickle. Around the time of the fall of the Roman Empire, numerous waves of barbarian invasions – originally emanating from Central Asia – had gradually worn the mighty but increasingly idle and decadent Roman Empire down to the point where, in AD 410, Rome was finally conquered and occupied by the Visigoths under King Alaric. Her spoils plundered, her gods defiled, her people slaughtered, enslaved or scattered, the mighty Roman Empire, the light of Europe, ceased to exist, and the West was plunged into a prolonged Dark Age. Brown explains in *The Rise of Western Christendom*,

The most striking, and decisive, feature of conventional narratives of the end of the Roman Empire and the early Middle Ages has been the insistence that the history of western Europe has always been characterized by a natural unity. This unity was regarded as the ideal. Departures from it were held to be a sign of decay and of aimless anarchy. It was assumed that the unity of western Europe had first come into existence under the Roman empire. From the north of Britain to North Africa, the charmed world enclosed within the Roman frontiers was the first Europe. In 1912, the author of a study of the Romanization of Roman Britain could write: “The safety of Rome was the safety of all civilization. Outside roared the wild chaos of barbarism.” After the year AD 400 [however,] the frontiers of the empire collapsed, and the wild chaos of bar-

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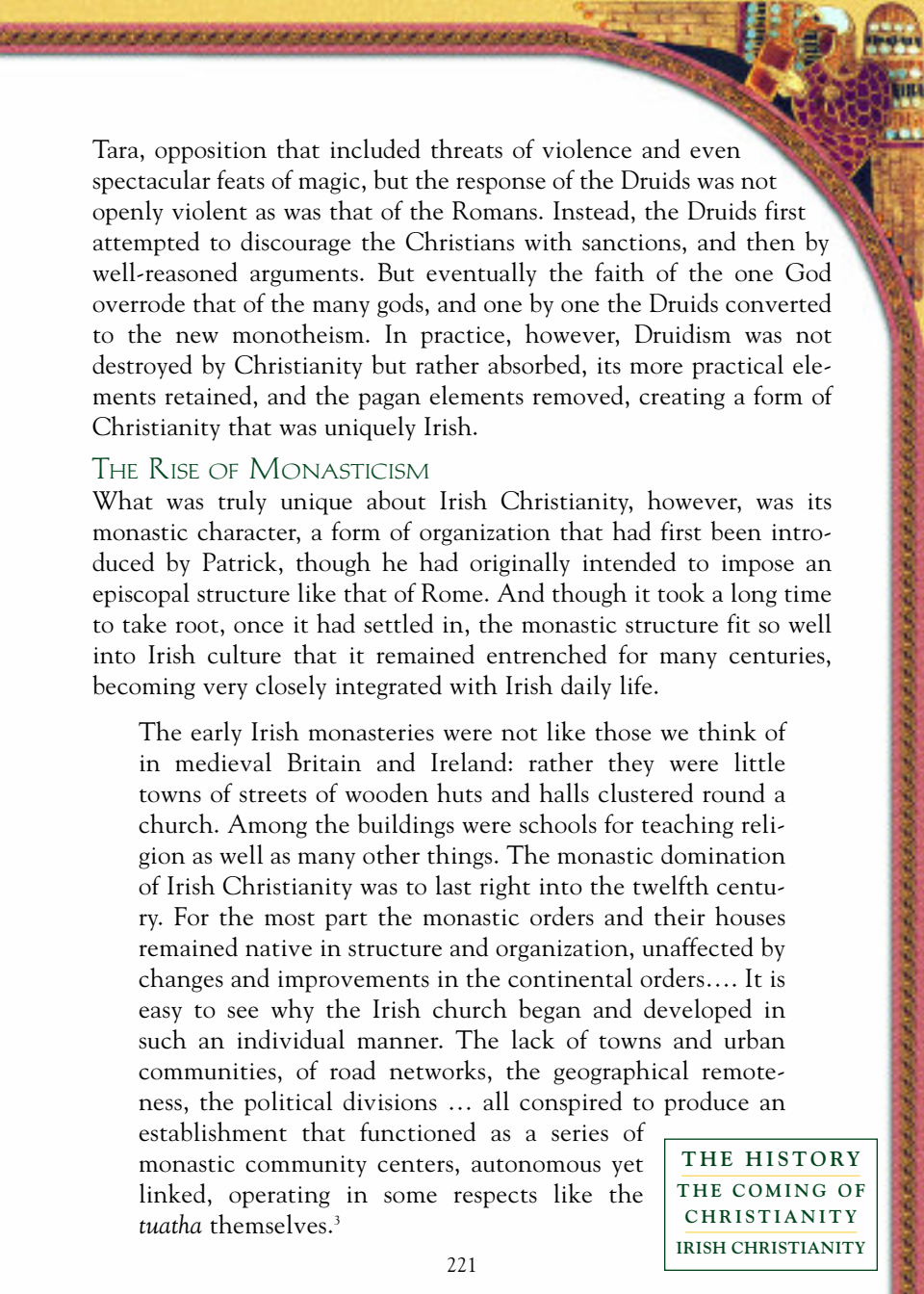
barism flooded into the empire from across the North Sea, the Rhine, and the Danube. The period of the “Barbarian Invasions” effectively destroyed the first unity of Europe. But all was not lost. Christianity had already spread widely in continental western Europe. It was through the insubstantial but tenacious bonds created by the Catholic Church that the broken unity of Roman Europe was recreated. All roads came to lead, yet again, to Rome, as the papacy established itself as the undisputed center of a new, Catholic West.<sup>1</sup>

Christianity had initially been violently repulsed by the Roman Empire, and Christians were at best tolerated for centuries afterwards. This persecution did not subside until Emperor Constantine beheld a vision of a cross in the heavens that inspired him to issue the famous *Edict of Milan* in AD 313, wherein Christianity was cited as the new official religion of the Roman Empire.<sup>2</sup> As a result, with the official *imprimatur* of the state, and with the help of the superior Roman communications and transportation systems, Christianity spread far and wide throughout the empire and beyond, trickling even as far west as Ireland.

The wheel of fate had been set in motion to allow Christendom to spread to the far corners of the empire because, a century later, the Roman Empire would cease to exist, and the light of Rome would be smashed into a thousand sparks, the sole remains of which remained smouldering on the outer rim of the old Republic. But it was from these embers that the fire of civilization would be slowly relit, a civilization based this time not upon paganism, but upon Christianity. And one of the brightest embers remaining from the Roman period was Irish Christianity.

### *Irish Christianity*

St. Patrick was the first successful missionary to Ireland, though Christianity already had been filtering in to Ireland through informal channels for some time. As with Rome, the first Christian missionaries were initially repulsed by the Irish, but unlike Rome, there were no Christian martyrs. St. Patrick met with strenuous opposition from the druids at



Tara, opposition that included threats of violence and even spectacular feats of magic, but the response of the Druids was not openly violent as was that of the Romans. Instead, the Druids first attempted to discourage the Christians with sanctions, and then by well-reasoned arguments. But eventually the faith of the one God overrode that of the many gods, and one by one the Druids converted to the new monotheism. In practice, however, Druidism was not destroyed by Christianity but rather absorbed, its more practical elements retained, and the pagan elements removed, creating a form of Christianity that was uniquely Irish.

### THE RISE OF MONASTICISM

What was truly unique about Irish Christianity, however, was its monastic character, a form of organization that had first been introduced by Patrick, though he had originally intended to impose an episcopal structure like that of Rome. And though it took a long time to take root, once it had settled in, the monastic structure fit so well into Irish culture that it remained entrenched for many centuries, becoming very closely integrated with Irish daily life.

The early Irish monasteries were not like those we think of in medieval Britain and Ireland: rather they were little towns of streets of wooden huts and halls clustered round a church. Among the buildings were schools for teaching religion as well as many other things. The monastic domination of Irish Christianity was to last right into the twelfth century. For the most part the monastic orders and their houses remained native in structure and organization, unaffected by changes and improvements in the continental orders.... It is easy to see why the Irish church began and developed in such an individual manner. The lack of towns and urban communities, of road networks, the geographical remoteness, the political divisions ... all conspired to produce an establishment that functioned as a series of monastic community centers, autonomous yet linked, operating in some respects like the *tuatha* themselves.<sup>3</sup>

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## The Saints

### ST. PATRICK

St. Patrick (AD 390-461) is the National Apostle and Saint of Ireland, and probably the most famous and celebrated person in Irish history. There are varying stories on his origins, but most believe that he was born a Romanized Briton either in Cumbria (Wales) or Scotland. The tradition has it that he was captured in a raid by the famous King *Niall Noígallach* (Niall of the Nine Hostages, *q.v.*), and was sold by the Irish raiders as a slave to a man named Milchu, a chieftain of Dalriada, in what is now County Antrim. There he was put to work as a shepherd for Milchu, who was also the local high druid.

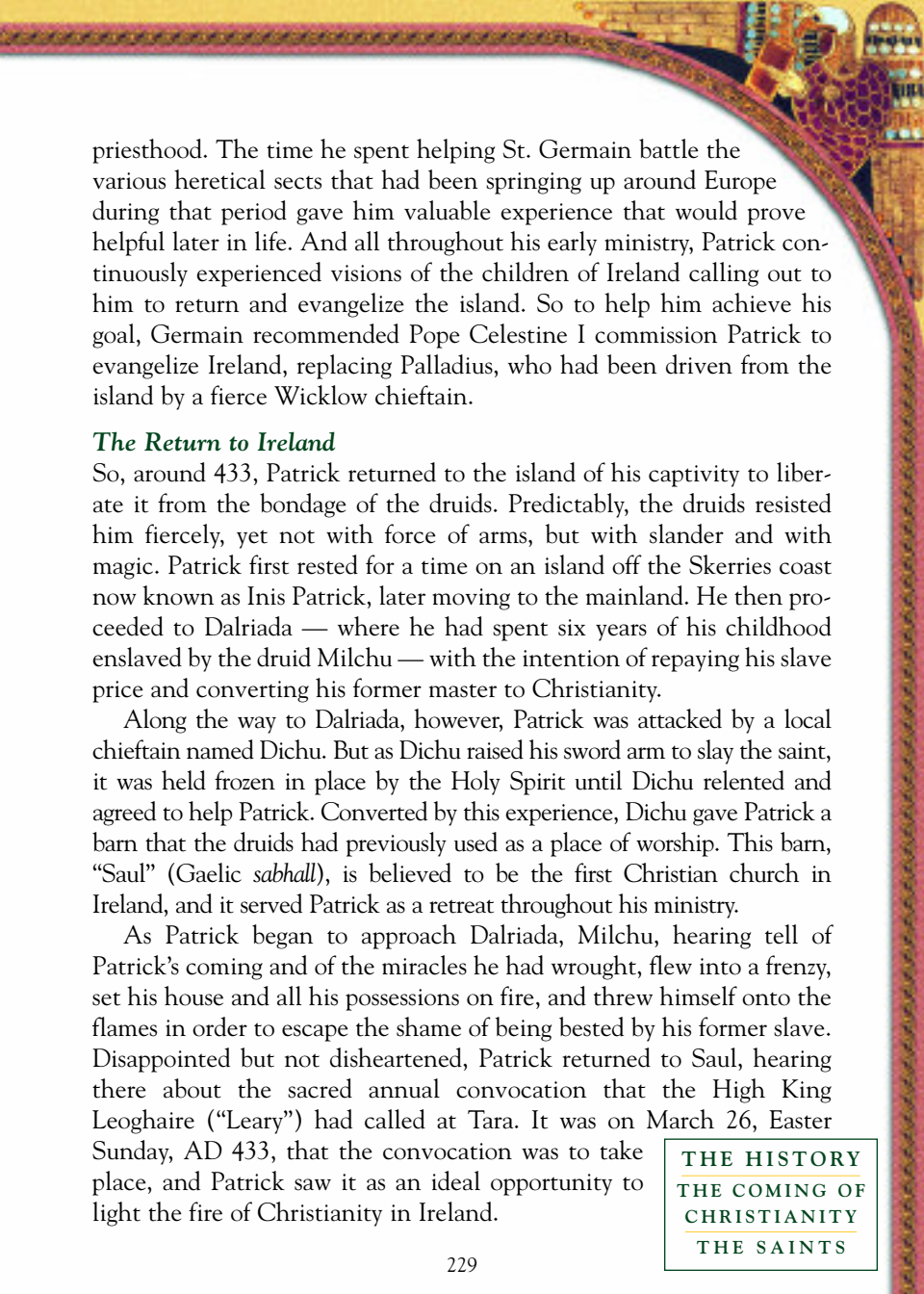
During his captivity, Patrick learned a great deal about the Irish language and customs, also learning a great deal about the Druidism that he was destined to banish from the sacred isle. After six years in captivity Patrick was visited by an angel, and to his surprise, the angel admonished Patrick for tarrying too long in Ireland, telling him to escape back to his family. This he did successfully, reuniting with his family and friends in Britain.

### The Call

Feeling the call into ministry, Patrick later emigrated to France and joined the monastery at Tours. After his sojourn there, he spent some time at the renowned Abbey of Lérins, located on the island of the same name off the coast of Provence. Patrick was then taken as a student by the renowned St. Germain, who aided him in his entry into the



"St Patrick Banishes the Serpents"  
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priesthood. The time he spent helping St. Germain battle the various heretical sects that had been springing up around Europe during that period gave him valuable experience that would prove helpful later in life. And all throughout his early ministry, Patrick continuously experienced visions of the children of Ireland calling out to him to return and evangelize the island. So to help him achieve his goal, Germain recommended Pope Celestine I commission Patrick to evangelize Ireland, replacing Palladius, who had been driven from the island by a fierce Wicklow chieftain.

### *The Return to Ireland*

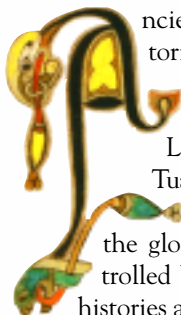
So, around 433, Patrick returned to the island of his captivity to liberate it from the bondage of the druids. Predictably, the druids resisted him fiercely, yet not with force of arms, but with slander and with magic. Patrick first rested for a time on an island off the Skerries coast now known as Inis Patrick, later moving to the mainland. He then proceeded to Dalriada — where he had spent six years of his childhood enslaved by the druid Milchu — with the intention of repaying his slave price and converting his former master to Christianity.

Along the way to Dalriada, however, Patrick was attacked by a local chieftain named Dichu. But as Dichu raised his sword arm to slay the saint, it was held frozen in place by the Holy Spirit until Dichu relented and agreed to help Patrick. Converted by this experience, Dichu gave Patrick a barn that the druids had previously used as a place of worship. This barn, “Saul” (Gaelic *sabhall*), is believed to be the first Christian church in Ireland, and it served Patrick as a retreat throughout his ministry.

As Patrick began to approach Dalriada, Milchu, hearing tell of Patrick’s coming and of the miracles he had wrought, flew into a frenzy, set his house and all his possessions on fire, and threw himself onto the flames in order to escape the shame of being bested by his former slave. Disappointed but not disheartened, Patrick returned to Saul, hearing there about the sacred annual convocation that the High King Leoghaire (“Leary”) had called at Tara. It was on March 26, Easter Sunday, AD 433, that the convocation was to take place, and Patrick saw it as an ideal opportunity to light the fire of Christianity in Ireland.

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# Ancient Irish Culture



ancient Irish culture, as we have seen, was a patchwork of histories and traditions, myths and legends from the numerous invaders that have conquered the sacred isle throughout the millennia. From the tales of the powerful Fianna of Leinster province in the east, the myths and legends of the Tuatha dé Danann who held the south, the fierce Fir Bolg who made their stronghold in Connaught in the west, and the glorious tales of The Knights of the Red Branch who controlled Ulster in the north, each province of Ireland has its own histories and traditions that make each region unique. Yet unlike the British Isles, which have yet to fully integrate culturally Ireland, despite the recent troubles, remains a culturally cohesive unit, with religious, social, economic and political systems that are uniquely Irish.

In this chapter of *The History*, we will take a look at the ancient Irish culture that confronted the early Christian monks who were struggling to evangelize the sacred isle. In the process, we will attempt to summarize the major elements of ancient Irish culture that we have covered thus far, and look at them in some more detail in order to shed some more light on the specifics of daily life in ancient Ireland. In so doing we hope to provide a more solid understanding of the lifeways of the ancient Irish, including the religious beliefs, social folkways and mores, and the economic and political structures which, to some extent, still persist in the modern Irish worldview.

## *Ancient Irish Religion*

The religion of the ancient Irish was, like all ancient, non-monotheistic religions, essentially the worship of the material world as the outward manifestation of deity. Outside of direct revelation from a divine being, as is typical of monotheistic religions, it is the predisposition of man to worship that which his five senses can perceive. And those things that hold the greatest power over him, such as the sun, moon, and stars, and natural forces such as the wind, the rain and the fertility of the land, were believed to be the

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highest manifestation of the impersonal deity that they believed lay behind the powers of nature. As such, the sun, moon, stars and other natural forces stood at the center of the ancient pagan cosmogony, forming the absolute point of reference against which all things were measured. And over time, these beliefs became concretized in their myths, rituals and architecture.



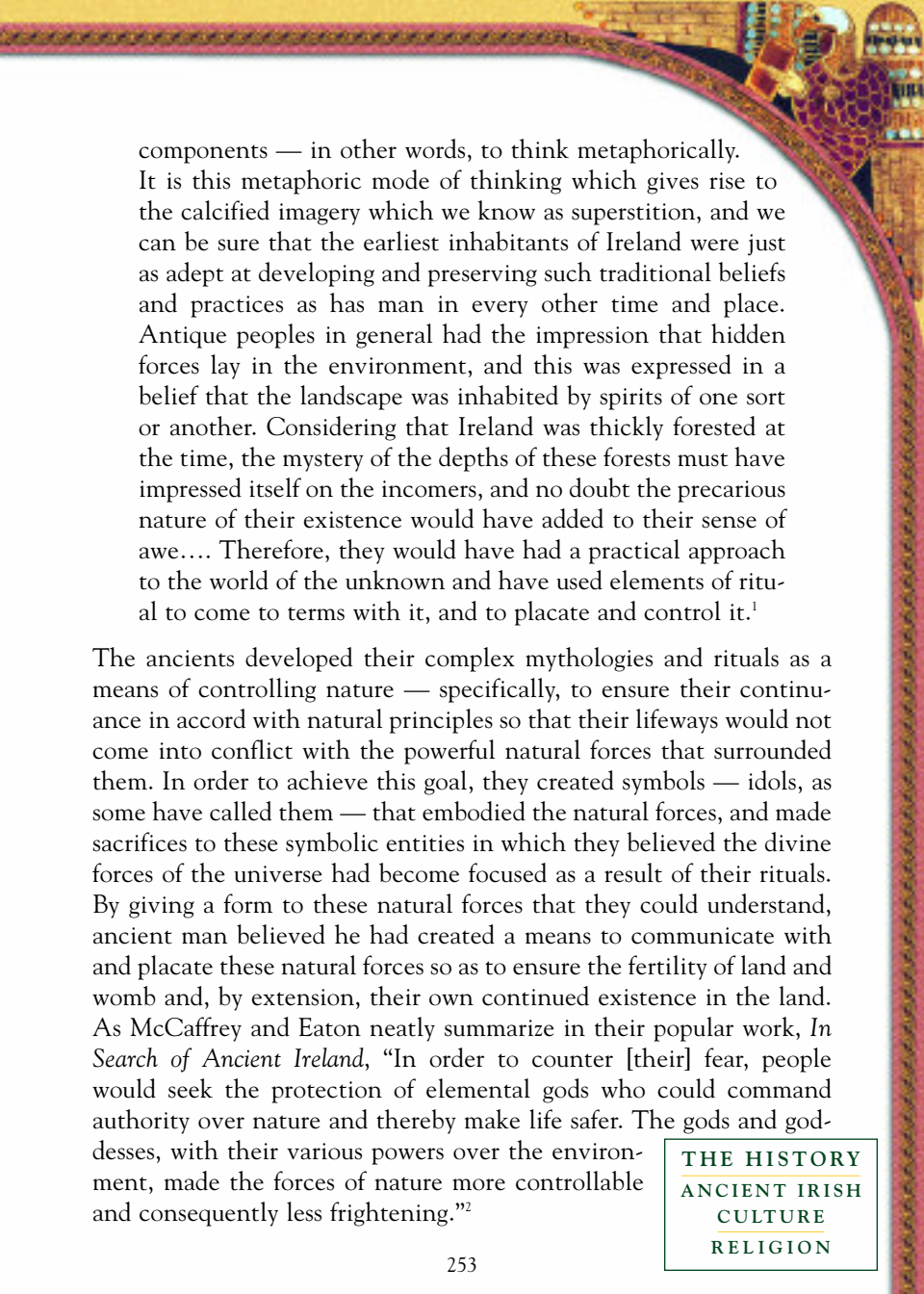
The religion of the ancients revolved around the worship of the sun, moon and stars, beliefs that were reflected in their architecture.†

### THE PAGAN WORLDVIEW

As a result of this five-sense-oriented mindset, the pagan mind developed a worldview that was relative to the environment in which it was situated, creating complex mythologies to explain the capricious actions of the natural forces that it encountered, and formulating “metaphoric” rituals specifically designed to control them. As Dáithí Ó hÓgáin explains in *The Sacred Isle: Belief and Religion in Pre-Christian Ireland*,

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The human mind, in its attempt to unravel a mystery, tries to concretize and dramatize its



components — in other words, to think metaphorically. It is this metaphoric mode of thinking which gives rise to the calcified imagery which we know as superstition, and we can be sure that the earliest inhabitants of Ireland were just as adept at developing and preserving such traditional beliefs and practices as has man in every other time and place. Antique peoples in general had the impression that hidden forces lay in the environment, and this was expressed in a belief that the landscape was inhabited by spirits of one sort or another. Considering that Ireland was thickly forested at the time, the mystery of the depths of these forests must have impressed itself on the incomers, and no doubt the precarious nature of their existence would have added to their sense of awe.... Therefore, they would have had a practical approach to the world of the unknown and have used elements of ritual to come to terms with it, and to placate and control it.<sup>1</sup>

The ancients developed their complex mythologies and rituals as a means of controlling nature — specifically, to ensure their continuance in accord with natural principles so that their lifeways would not come into conflict with the powerful natural forces that surrounded them. In order to achieve this goal, they created symbols — idols, as some have called them — that embodied the natural forces, and made sacrifices to these symbolic entities in which they believed the divine forces of the universe had become focused as a result of their rituals. By giving a form to these natural forces that they could understand, ancient man believed he had created a means to communicate with and placate these natural forces so as to ensure the fertility of land and womb and, by extension, their own continued existence in the land. As McCaffrey and Eaton neatly summarize in their popular work, *In Search of Ancient Ireland*, “In order to counter [their] fear, people would seek the protection of elemental gods who could command authority over nature and thereby make life safer. The gods and goddesses, with their various powers over the environment, made the forces of nature more controllable and consequently less frightening.”<sup>2</sup>

## BRIAN BORU

Brian Boru was born around AD 942 in Munster province, in what is now County Clare, as one of the sons of King Cennedig (Kennedy) of the Dál Cais clan. When Brian was a young boy, Viking raiders had murdered his mother, and so he grew up determined to drive them out of Ireland. To this end, Brian had decided to take the fight directly to the enemy, ignoring the more timid approach of the other Dál Cais kings, particularly his brother, Mahon. To achieve his goal, he hand-picked an elite force of fighters from among the Dál Cais army and proceeded to wage a very successful guerrilla war against the

Viking King Ivar. Brian was so successful at this that fear of his small army spread throughout the whole region, attracting many volunteers to his cause. So great was his renown that even his brother, King Mahon reconciled with him, joining forces with him to destroy the Viking dominance of the region forever. The Viking King Ivar was not through, however, and had Mahon assassinated soon afterwards. Wishing to avoid a bloodbath, Brian challenged Ivar to single combat, and defeated him.

Now the king of the Dál Cais clan, Brian aggressively carried out his plan to place all of Munster under his sway. By defeating the king of Cashel in 978, thereby displacing the last of the Eóganacht kings, he took lordship over all of Munster. The following years then saw a dramatic rise in the power of Brian, which in turn led to a rise in the fortunes of Munster province and, eventually, all of Ireland.

But while Brian had taken control of the south, Máel Sechnaill II (Malachy), the high king of the Uí



“Brian Boru”

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“James Joyce” – © Barrie Maguire.

## Literature

Irish literature is world-renowned, and its greatest works are required reading for any student of English. The Irish love of books and words became evident once again during the literary revival that took place during the 18th – 20th centuries, when the increasingly common use of the English language began to give a new generation of writers new ways to express themselves.

The Irish love of writing and story has been evident since very ancient times, and the ancient epics of Ireland have even reappeared in various forms in modern Irish literature. But the moderns stand very well on their own, to the point where, in Dublin, there

have evolved “summer schools” that are devoted purely to literary pursuits, usually located around the former haunting grounds of the numerous luminaries in the field, of which there are many:

### JONATHAN SWIFT (1667-1745)

Political satirist Jonathan Swift was born in Dublin, Ireland on November 30, 1667. He is believed to be the first Irish author to make a significant contribution to English literature with his most famous work, *Gulliver's Travels*, first published in 1726. Though usually labeled a children's book, *Gulliver's Travels* is actually a very clever political satire that provides us with some very detailed and cogent insights into the socio-economic and political conditions of the time.

In 1729 Swift followed up his first successful novel with *A Modest Proposal*, a darkly humorous piece written during lean times in Ireland where Swift, posing as a “political arithmetician” coolly suggested to

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## Traveling to Ireland

Ireland is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world. Over six million Irish of the *diaspora*, as well as Celtophiles, lovers of ancient history, religion and mythology, or just people enamoured of the mystery that is Ireland visit every year, a number that has experienced a significant net growth over the past decade. According to the



"The Tackled Pony" – © Barrie Maguire.

World Travel Organization (WTO), over four million visitors to Ireland come from the UK, almost twice as many as come from all other countries combined, including America. Around 900,000 visitors came from the U.S. and Canada in 2004, up over 5% from 2003, and over 130,000 came from Asia, including Australia and New Zealand – both, like the U.S., also significant repositories of the Irish diaspora.

### TRAVEL TIPS

Traveling to Ireland is surprisingly simple, especially when coming from other western countries such as the United States. This is particularly true of visitors from the UK, where the British tourist will find little difference in the quality of basic services. As always you will need a passport, but a visa is not required when coming from the UK, US, Canada, Mexico, any European Union country, and numerous other countries all over the world (see <http://www.tourismireland.com> for the latest information). Make sure to check with your health care provider to see if you are covered when traveling overseas, or else you may be in for a difficult time if there is an accident. If you are not covered, consult your travel agent on purchasing traveler's insurance, both for yourself, those with you, and for your possessions.

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## Money & Exchange Rates

It is advisable to carry some cash with you at all times, as not all hotels and restaurants take credit cards or traveler's checks, particularly those in the countryside. It is best to have all three of course, and to save your cash for emergencies. Also, don't keep all of your money in one place — divide it between your wallet, a money belt, and perhaps some hidden in your luggage as a backup.

If you are out of cash, ATMs can be found all over the island, though there are of course service fees. Cards accepted around the island include Master Card/Maestro, Visa/Electron, American Express, and Diners Club, though AmEx and Diner's will have more limited acceptance. If your card is lost or stolen, from Ireland call 1-800-558-002 (VISA), 1-800-557-378 (Master Card), 1-800-282-728 or call collect 336-393-1111 (AmEx) and 1-800-709-944 (Diner's). From Northern Ireland call 0800-895-082 or 0800-891-725 (VISA), 0800-964-767 (MasterCard), 01237-696933 and 0800-460-800 (Diner's). 800 numbers are free at payphones throughout the island and do not require coins or a calling card. These numbers may change, so be sure to verify these emergency numbers with your credit card providers before departure.

Most currencies can be exchanged at a local bank, as well as some post offices and tourist centers, but doing so will also incur service fees. Normal bank hours are 9:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. Some of the larger banks may be open on Saturday, but all are closed on Sundays and bank holidays (see "Holidays").

It is important to note that the Republic of Ireland, as part of the European Union, is now on the Euro (€), whereas Northern Ireland is a part of the United Kingdom, and thus still uses the British Pound Sterling (£). In the Republic, the Euro is divided into 100 cents, with coins valuing 1, 2, 5, 10, 20 and 50 cents, 1 Euro (EUR 1) and 2 Euros (EUR 2), and notes valuing 5, 10, 20, 50, 100, 200 and 500 Euros. In Northern Ireland the pound sterling is divided into 100 pence, with coins valuing 1p, 2p, 5p, 10p, 20p, 50p and 1 pound, and notes valued at 5, 10, 20, 50 and 100 pounds. As of the date of this writing (May 2006), \$1 US = €.79 = £.54. (For the latest exchange rate, visit XE.com's Universal Currency Converter® at <http://www.xe.com/ucc/>). Euros and pounds sterling

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